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IN DEFENSE OF ALIENATION.

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THE TERM ALIENATION IS IN IMMINENT DANGER OF BECOMING PART OF THE VOCABULARY OF POLITE ABUSE. ONE OF THE WORD'S VIRTUES IS ITS AMBIGUITY. IN THE SOCIOLOGICAL TRADITION, ALIENATION REFERS TO A STRUCTURAL CONDITION. PEOPLE ARE ALIENATED MORE OR LESS AGAINST THEIR WILL. IN THE PSYCHOLOGICAL MEANING, ALIENATION PRESUPPOSES SOME INNER ATTITUDE, GENERALLY A REJECTION OR REPUDIATION DIRECTED AT SOME IMPORTANT ASPECT OF THE SOCIAL WORLD. UNDER MANY PSYCHOLOGICAL, SOCIAL, AND HISTORICAL CONDITIONS, ALIENATION IS A REASONABLE AND JUSTIFIED RESPONSE. TO ILLUSTRATE SOME OF THE VARIETIES OF ALIENATION AND SUGGEST ITS POSSIBLF MERITS, THREE CASE STUDIES ARE DESCRIBED. THE CASE STUDIES SUGGEST THAT YOUTHFUL ALIENATION IS NOT ALWAYS TO BE DEPLORED, AND THAT THE INDIVIDUAL SHOULD BE HELPED TO FOCUS AND EXPRESS ALIENATION PRODUCTIVELY. THIS PAPER WAS PRESENTED AT THE 44TH ANNUAL MEETING OF THE AMERICAN ORTHO-PSYCHIATRIC ASSOCIATION, WASHINGTON, D.C., MARCH 21, 1967.

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In Defense of Alienation

(Invited Talk, American Ortho-Psychiatric Association National Conference, Washington, D.C., Panel on "Alienated and Committed Youth", March 21, 1967)

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In Defense of Alienation

Not long ago, in the men's room of a large university library, I noticed a neatly-printed wall inscription that read, "Help stamp out alienation". The graffito, I presume, was intended humorously by the wall writer who inscribed it. But the attitude it expressed is, I fear, a widespread one. This morning I want to address myself to that attitude, speaking in defense of alienation and urging that before we condemn those who are alienated or the positions they take, we examine carefully the psychological meanings and social justifications of alienation.

The concept of alienation has long been a part of the sociological and psychological vocabulary. But in the past decade or so, this concept has moved from the technical works of writers like Karl Marx or Karen Horney into the vocabulary of social criticism, ordinary discourse, insult and abuse. Since I have done studies of one kind of alienated youth, I have frequently received letters from distressed parents informing me that they have an alienated son, and asking me what kind of therapy I would recommend. Or, on other occasions, I have been asked to take part in panels and symposia where it soon becomes clear that alienation is what we come to deplore and find cures for, whereas commitment, acceptance, integration, adaptation and adjustment are what we are promoting. There is an imminent danger, then, that the term "alienation" will become merely a part of our vocabulary of polite abuse--another word like "maladjusted", "neurotic", or "inappropriate", by which we can criticize other people without appearing to blame them personally for their faults.

One of the special virtues of the word "alienation" as a term of abuse is that it is so highly ambiguous. This is not the place for an analysis of all the many meanings which can be given to the term. But it is important to

note that in the sociological tradition, alienation refers to a "structural" condition: that is, people are alienated more or less against their will and often without their awareness by being excluded from some important social network or institution: thus, the worker is said to be alienated from his labor by capitalist society, the negro is alienated by discrimination from access to the main streams of American life, etc. In the more psychological meaning of alienation which I will emphasize this morning, alienation usually presupposes some inner attitude, generally a rejection or a repudiation, directed at some important aspect of the social world, especially some conventional expectation about right conduct or right thinking. The culturally alienated artist or intellectual is said to repudiate many of the values of burgeois society. The politically alienated revolutionary rejects and seeks to change many of the fundamental institutions of his society. The behaviorally alienated juvenile delinquent rejects the conventional standards of right conduct--he tends to seek socially-valued ends like wealth by illegitimate means like theft. And finally, students of major behavior disorders like schizophrenia have emphasized the schizophrenic's profound alienation from ordinary human relationships, and his rejection of the demands of conventional adult life.

This enumeration of a few of the many possible forms of psychological alienation suggests, I hope, the enormous diversity of psychological types that can be given this label. No doubt there may turn out to be similarities between all alienated men and women. But at present, the differences are most impressive: What does the politically alienated student activist have in common with the hospitalized schizophrenic adolescent? What similarities can we find between the artistically disaffected college drama major and his behaviorally alienated

contemporary in a delinquent gang? Clearly, there is a world of difference. Thus, before we discuss alienation and commitment at all, we must ask ourselves, "Alienation from what? Commitment to what?"

But my main point this morning is not a plea for clearer definitions. Rather, it is the assertion that under many psychological, social and historical conditions, alienation is a reasonable, rational, appropriate and eminently justified response. To be sure, like all complex human attitudes, alienation springs from both conscious and unconscious sources, and is intimately related to the individual's past and his psychodynamics. But of course, the fact that alienation has psychological sources in no way distinguishes it from commitment or any other human attitude; and in any case, as we all know, the psychological sources of the belief in no way determine its ultimate validity.

To illustrate some of the varieties of alienation, and to suggest its possible merits, I want to discuss three students who illustrate some of the complexities in arriving at a final judgment of alienation. In each case, I will tell you something about the adolescence and early adulthood of the student.

I will call the first student Stall. This young man came to college from a suburban community I will call Parkhurst, one of those middle class developments with an entirely white Protestant population, where the average breadwinner earns between $15,000 and $25,000 a year. Parkhurst High School sends more than 95% of its students on to college: a large proportion of these attend "select" or "prestigious" institutions. Parkhurst itself was built after the end of the Second World War, and it consists of ample, comfortable ranch style houses, costing between $40,000 and $50,000, each surrounded by an acre of land and green lawns.

In Parkhurst, Stall's family was somewhat unusual. His father had never been to college, and although he was a skilled technician with an excellent income, he felt estranged from his neighbors who were lawyers, engineers and businessmen. Stall's mother, on the other hand, was a woman with a college degree who in some respects looked down upon her husband, considering him her cultural and intellectual inferior. Stall was closest to his mother, despite the fact that she was often possessive and nagging with him. He felt quite distant from his father, although he secretly sympathized with his father's plight, both as an outsider in their upper middle class neighborhood and as the target of his mother's subtle deprecations.

In Parkhurst High, Stall did outstanding work academically. Yet perhaps because of his father's marginal social position, he was never included in the elite social groups which ran Parkhurst High. As his senior year in high school approached, he became increasingly critical of these high school cliques, their values and their activities. But he never expressed any of these feelings, although he spent rather more time at home reading or working around the house than did most of his age mates.

On arriving in college, Stall was assigned to room with three other boys of similar suburban backgrounds. Before entering college, he had decided that he would try to become a social success in a way that he had not succeeded in being in high school. But in fact, he found this very difficult; and with social success eluding him, he became more and more interested in ultimate philosophical questions, and decided he would major in philosophy.

By the end of his freshman year, Stall found himself increasingly critical and estranged from his room mates, who had succeeded where he had failed in the

"social swim" of college life. Yet he was unable to disentangle himself from them, and made plans to room with them another year. Secretly, he began to look wistfully at other undergraduates who seemed to him committed to worthy social and political causes. Yet he was almost paralyzed when it came to getting to know these students and joining their organizations; he said he did not know how to act; he felt here as he had in previous situations: estranged and "out of it". As the year progressed, he became more and more critical of the values of his own community of Parkhurst, and he began to take a "new look" at his parents: he began to react against his mother's efforts to control him, and became quite vehement in his dislike of what he saw as his father's narrowness and bigotry.

Returning for his sophomore year, Stall became even more discontented and depressed. He began to quarrel with his room mates, and spent more and more of his time working in the library or sitting in a local coffee house. More important, at least for our theme of alienation, his disaffection with his parents and with Parkhurst grew. Whenever he discussed Parkhurst, he would flush with anger and be reduced to incoherence by the intensity of his feelings. Parkhurst began to be seen as the epitome of American life: it was narrow, petty, smug, self absorbed, bigoted, self-congratulatory, tawdry, cheap and materialistic. Stall decided that he was wasting his time at college, and that he ran the danger of being corrupted by the complacency of college life. He found it increasingly difficult to do his academic assignments, and by the end of the year, he made up his mind to drop out of college. When he informed his parents of this, they reacted in the way he had predicted: they were hurt, insulted, angry and threatening, but their pleas fell on deaf ears. Stall resigned from college in the spring of 1963, joined the Maritime Union, and shipped out as a seaman on a freighter leaving New York for Japan.

Let me now turn to a second student whom I will call Solly. The most striking thing about Solly's background before he came to the University was his odd, even bizarre family life. Solly had been brought up in a large city by his father, with whom he had the most intense and ambivalent of relationships. For many years, Solly's father was his only teacher. Solly had been either kept out of school or tutored after school by his father with special lessons designed to produce in Solly an intense concern for religious ideas, theological issues, and morality. Solly almost never mentioned his mother, who seems to have been a housekeeper before Solly's father married her. But in some of Solly's discussions of his parents, he suggested that his father was forced to marry his mother because she was illegitimately pregnant. Solly preferred not to discuss this, but occasionally alluded to the deep shame that surrounded his father's life, and to the impact of the horrible revelations that had been made to Solly when he was young.

Throughout his adolescence, Solly cut a very peculiar figure amongst his contemporaries. Though his brilliance was recognized by all, he was considered odd and bizarre. Physically, he was a tall, stooped and angular young man, given to extravagant mannerisms and dress, painfully shy with his contemporaries. He became obsessed with the most abstruse philosophical and theological issues, and his brilliance and precosity made him the intellectual equal of many of his father's friends, themselves religious men, with whom he frequently debated. In these debates, Solly upheld his growing convictions in the fundamental absurdity of life, the impossibility of knowing God, and the triviality of conventional theology.

Solly had few friends, although he would occasionally meet with college and graduate students to discuss theological issues. At one point, to everyone's

surprise, he became engaged to a wholesome, open and loving girl who appeared to be genuinely fond of him. But faced with the imminent prospect of marriage, Solly broke off his engagement, proclaiming his unworthiness and inability to marry. After this, he buried himself even more deeply in his books and in a voluminous diary. His attacks on established religious, moral and philosophical values became ever more intense. He wrote lengthy and highly autobiographical works, literary analyses and allegories which he sought to publish under a pseudonym. He began to think of himself as a kind of martyr, and became convinced that he was destined to die at the age of 33.

Let me now turn to a third student, whom I will call Spy. Religion was also an important factor in Spy's background. The eldest son of a devout Catholic family, he was brought up in a conservative religious tradition. His father had early abandoned his career as a teacher to enter a large governmental bureaucracy, and his mother, with seven children to care for, had devoted herself to the difficult task of raising her large brood. Spy had always felt somewhat closer to his mother than to his father, but there was much evidence that he also felt neglected by her. As the eldest son, he had been displaced six times by the birth of younger siblings, to each of whom he felt his mother had devoted more attention than to him. In early childhood, he had become convinced that no one could ever have what he wants in life, and that all hopes were doomed to disappointment.

In high school, Spy was not only an excellent student but a popular one. Attending Jesuit schools, he particularly excelled in theological, moral and religious subjects. He was a leader among his class mates, and was frequently elected to responsible positions. But it was during his high school career that

his mother confided to him her unhappiness with her marriage, and advised him that if he ever aspired to creativity, he should never marry.

College had a pronounced impact upon Spy. For the first time he was exposed to ideas that challenged his Catholic upbringing. From an unexamined but devoutly religious position, he moved very rapidly to an extremely atheistic one, and he began to take great pleasure in debating against those of his classmates who had retained their devoutness. Much to his parents' dismay, he became interested in depth psychology, particularly in psychoanalytic arguments that tend to explain religion as a disguised transference to the father. Spy's relationships with his parents also deteriorated considerably: during his visits home, he missed no opportunity to shock them by espousing his militant atheism.

In his sophomore year, Spy began to go out with girls who were unacceptable to his parents. In particular, he entered into a long and passionately liaison with a Jewish girl. He managed to keep his parents very well informed about the details of their relationship, and his parents' consternation was predictable, vigorous and vocal. Despite the real satisfactions in his relationship with his girl friend, Spy retained his bleakly pessimistic outlook on life, arguing that there was little lasting happiness for any one. A social science major, he began to take a highly critical look at American society, and became particularly concerned with what he considered the maltreatment of the poor by the dominant middle class of America.

All three of these young men are, I think, culturally and to some extent politically alienated. Stall is highly disaffected from the values of the middle class suburban world in which he grew up; Solly is extremely alienated from the theological views and outlook of his father and his father's friends; Spy, during

college, became increasingly critical not only of his own religious tradition but of many of the dominant practices of American society. With all three, the interaction of familial and psychological factors in alienation was clear: all three had, at some point in their lives, found themselves excluded from some important relationship or group--Stall by virtue of his father's marginal position in Parkhurst, Solly by virtue of his unusual education and appearance; and Spy, from the exclusive affection of a mother much preoccupied with his many siblings.

Now let me tell you something of what became of these three young men. Stall jumped ship in Japan and found himself a job in a community development project. His Japanese experience was a revelation to him: everything came alive to him, his senses and feelings opened to the world, and his depression gave way to an almost hypomanic sense of excitement, enthusiasm and enjoyment. Hitch-hiking and working his way across the world from Japan, he found himself back in this country in the summer of 1964, where he joined one of the groups that spent the summer in Mississippi. There, he was known as a dedicated and effective activist in the Freedom Schools. And upon his return to college the next fall, he changed his major from philosophy to a new combination which would allow him to study the problems of the urban poor in American society. He began to room with friends active in the Civil Rights movement, and his grade average soared from the middle half of his class to the top 5%. His views about Parkhurst and his parents did not change; but his new determination to prepare himself for work in urban studies and community development made him less wrathy and more mellow in the expression of these views.

The second student, Solly, is actually Soren Kierkegaard, the Danish existentialist. The story of the remainder of his life is a matter of public

record, and we all know of the impact of this brilliant, bizzare, and intensely alienated man on the thinking of our own century.

I am not sure how to characterize the outcome for Spy--whether as happy or unhappy. In any case, he became a social psychologist. He married the girl who had caused his family so much consternation. Throughout his graduate work at an excellent university, he remained disaffected and alienated from graduate school and the curriculum, was intensely impatient with the experimental studies of attitude change in which most of his professors were engaged, and was often irritated at what he considered the narrow academic professionalism of many of his contemporaries and of the faculty. But this same faculty generally considered him an outstanding, if unconventional, student and they predicted a brilliant career for him. His major theoretical interest is in the study of the poor, the neglected, the excluded, the deprived in American society.

I have deliberately chosen to present three students who were able to turn their alienation into profit: they had the resources, inner and outer, to focus their rejection, repudiation and anger to relatively specific targets, and to find ways to be of use to their fellow men. In all three instances, formal education had a profound effect on them, not so much in producing commitment, but in first creating and then channeling their alienation. It would be possible, of course, to select other students with less happy outcomes; and I do not mean to argue that every form of alienation is good, nor that the psychological states that accompany alienation are always as benign as those in the three young men I have discussed.

But I do mean to suggest that youthful alienation is not always to be deplored, and that the question is not how to "cure it"--what form of therapy to

provide--but rather to help the individual focus and express his justified alienation productively. There are clearly many men and women who choose invalid targets for their rejection; and there are others who express their alienation in a self-defeating way that yields neither personal satisfaction nor social gain. But the same could be said of commitment: we should recall that, by many accounts, Adolph Eichmann was a man who was profoundly committed to the values, institutions and goals of his society. Yet we uniformly condemn him because the object of his commitment was so evil.

I imagine that the topic of this symposium is partly inspired by the many discussions of dissent, protest, rebellion and alienation among today's youth. Certainly the mass media and most of the general public agrees that all of these alienations are to be deplored. My own view is, as is probably obvious, different. For the vast majority of young Americans, the problem seems to me not so much alienation but indifference, apathy, and inability to criticize intelligently the many defects in our society and our world. Dissenters in American society are few; they are often outnumbered; they too frequently become disheartened, discouraged and defeated and turn their considerable talents away from the crucial problems of our age. Indeed, I think that if our society founders or fails, it will not be because of alienation or internal rebellion or dissent, but because we as a nation are too quick to deafen ourselves to dissent and explain away justified alienation, by pointing, as we always can, to its psychological and personal sources.

Much of what I have been trying to say this morning has been better said by Daniel Bell in his introduction to <u>The End of Ideology</u>. Bell says: "Alienation is not nihilism but a positive role, a detachment, which guards one against being submerged in any cause, or accepting any particular embodiment of community as

final. Nor is alienation deracination, a denial of one's roots or country. .... Society is most vigorous, and appealling, when both partisan and critic are legitimate voices in the permanent dialogue that is the testing of ideas and experience. One can be a critic of one's country without being an enemy of its promise."